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Soviets fill craters, dig new ones to fool U.S. on missile accuracy

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By Bill Gertz
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The Soviet Union is trying to deceive the United States about the accuracy of one of its nuclear missiles by filling in impact craters from test warheads, and by digging false craters to be photographed by U.S. spy satellites, says a U.S. government defense expert.

Recent photographs obtained by satellite reconnaissance taken in the early morning showed Soviet troops concealing test craters from incoming SS-19 warheads launched the night before at Soviet missile test sites on the Kamchatka peninsula, the expert said.

The photographs also show military personnel digging false craters in a wider radius, the expert said.

The SS-19 carries up to six multiple, independently targeted warheads — called MIRVs — on three known nuclear warhead modes. With a force of 360 missiles, it is the most widely deployed Soviet first-strike ICBM.

Revelations about the accuracy of the SS-19 appear to be part of a dispute within the U.S. intelligence community over estimates of the SS-19's accuracy.

The controversy seems to involve different views of analysts from the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency and the outcome could sway administration defense policy on strategic modernization programs, the defense expert said.

The Soviet deception is one of several reasons why Pentagon analysts dissented from a U.S. intelligence community assessment of the decreasing accuracy of the SS-19 and which was reported to pose less of a first-strike nuclear threat to U.S. strategic forces, the expert said.

Press reports citing the 1985 National Intelligence Estimate of Soviet strategic weapons trends said the CIA revised its estimate of the SS-19 warhead accuracy. The new judgment, reflected in the still-secret estimate, retroactively downgrades the CIA's previous analyses of the first-strike SS-19 since it was first tested in 1973.

Missile warhead accuracy is measured through a process called circular error probable — the radius of a circle within which at least 50 percent of a missile's warheads fall.

The SS-19's accuracy reportedly fell from a CEP radius of 330 feet to 440 feet, according to a report earlier this month in the National Journal. The loss in targeting ability would seriously affect U.S. assessments of the missile's ability to knock out "hardened" missile silos.

Public support for a very expensive military buildup over the last five years has been based in part on the idea that the United States is now more vulnerable to Soviet attack because of major increases in Soviet missile capabilities during the 1970s.

Defense experts believe the revised estimate of SS-19 accuracy could undercut the Reagan administration's strategic modernization program.

If Soviet missiles are deemed less accurate, critics of the administration's defense buildup in Congress could succeed in cutting the U.S. strategic modernization program.

The new estimate could strengthen support for the administration's plan to place new missiles in older, more vulnerable silos. The administration has been battling Congress over the deployment of the MX "Peacekeeper" missile.

Critics have charged that placing the larger MX in existing silos would leave the only U.S. ICBM capable of deterring a Soviet first strike vulnerable to such an attack.

Congress cut MX funding to 50 missiles, half the number requested by the administration.

A New York Times report on the SS-19 published July 19 states that the DIA disagreed with the revised accuracy estimate of the CIA and other U.S. intelligence community components. The dissent is reportedly outlined in a footnote to the NIE.

DIA believes the SS-19's accuracy has improved since the first uncoded electronic intercepts of flight data were made between April 1973 and March 1974.

Since 1974, only a small portion of the data has not been encoded, and therefore its characteristics — such as accuracy and weight — have been more difficult to determine.

"As a missile gets older, it gets better — not worse — through modifications," the expert said.

Another reason for the dispute on SS-19 accuracy, the expert said, is that the latest NIE indicates that the largest-sized Soviet ICBM, the SS-18, is expected to be deployed with more warheads than it has been tested with. To date, 10 warheads have been detected on tests of the SS-18.

"When it upgraded the estimate of SS-18 warheads, the CIA felt it had to downgrade the SS-19 in order to be partially consistent with its old bias of underestimating Soviet strategic forces," the defense expert said.

The latest intelligence estimate reportedly states that future modernizations of the SS-18 will put 12 warheads on each missile, according to the defense expert.

The controversy over Soviet missile accuracy dates to 1976 when two competing teams of intelligence analysts offered divergent opinions of the evolving accuracy of Soviet missile warheads.

The so-called "A-Team, B-Team" study revealed that Soviet missile accuracy was increasing faster than anticipated by previous CIA analyses. As a result, a "window of vulnerability" to Soviet attack would exist in the early 1980s before the United States could modernize its forces.

"The CIA is trying to revert to its original estimate of Soviet missile accuracy trends," the expert said.

The agency was charged by a team of analysts from outside the CIA with underestimating Soviet missile accuracy developments.

Arms Control and Disarmament Agency expert Matthew Murphy would not comment on the details of SS-19 accuracy, but he said missile accuracy is determined by "national technical means," the government euphemism for intelligence gathered by satellite reconnaissance and electronic listening posts.

An ACDA statement in response to reports of SS-19 accuracy warned against drawing "erroneous" conclusions about Soviet strategic cap-

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abilities.

"The Soviet Union possesses a tremendous capability to launch a devastating first strike against the U.S., and they are continuing to expand that capability," Mr. Murphy said in the statement. "The U.S. does not have a corresponding capability."

Mr. Murphy said reports on the SS-19 "distract attention from the SS-18." In the last six months, he said, the Soviet Union completed a modernization program for the SS-18 where the entire force has been deployed with a 10-warhead capability. Previously, some missiles carried 10 warheads and others carried only one or several.

"I don't think people realize that has occurred," Mr. Murphy said. "That's a tremendous jump in the number of SS-18 warheads."

The 308 SS-18s, all with 10 warheads, can target three very large nuclear explosions for each of the 1,000 U.S. missile silos currently deployed, he said.

In addition to the Soviet deception program, the U.S. government expert said the CIA's downgrading of the SS-19 accuracy stems from faulty analysis of data from two warhead types.

The NIE, produced by the interagency National Intelligence Council, averaged intelligence data from two different and widely varied SS-19 warheads in reaching its accuracy revision, the expert said.

The latest analysis of the SS-19 warhead accuracy in the NIE is also based in part on studies of impact craters from a combination of highly accurate nuclear re-entry vehicles and what are believed to be less accurate hits by chemical and biological warheads, the expert said.

Mr. Murphy would not comment on whether the SS-19 had been test-fired with chem-bio warheads, citing the secret nature of such data.

These less accurate chem-bio warheads can be dispersed to wider areas where combat troops or naval groups may be located. The suspected chem-bio warheads were detected by U.S. intelligence as SS-19 warheads entered the atmosphere, the defense expert said.

The non-nuclear chem-bio warheads have blunt shapes, weigh less than nuclear warheads and do not spin upon entering the atmosphere like nuclear-tipped warheads. These characteristics have led intelligence analysts to suspect the warheads are chemical and biological delivery vehicles.